

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***
*** Number 67: Buying Postage Online ***

Going to the post office, waiting in those long lines, and lugging bulky packages around ... it's enough to make you, well, go postal. Luckily, a number of Web sites sell postage online. You can buy traditional stamps from the comfort of your Web browser. Or try electronic postage, a new system that allows you to print postage on your own printer.

The United States Postal Service recently approved a new postage system, called electronic postage. With e-postage, customers can buy postage online, then print it directly onto envelopes using their inkjet or laser printers. The e-postage "stamp" doesn't look like a stamp at all: it appears as a two-dimensional bar code, a rectangle filled with tiny dots, that denotes the amount of postage as well as delivery information that can be decoded by the postal service's computers.

Two companies currently offer electronic postage: E-Stamp and Stamps.com. Although anyone can use the e-postage services, they are aimed primarily at businesses that send many letters or packages as an alternative to office postage meters. The USPS itself doesn't offer electronic postage (yet), but you can buy traditional stamps from its Web site.

-.-.- E-Stamp -.-.-

You can use E-Stamp to send mail via first class, priority, express mail, and parcel post. In order to buy postage, you'll need special hardware that connects to your PC's printer port. E-Stamp calls it an "electronic vault," but computer geeks call it a "dongle." When you buy postage from the Web site, its value is saved in the dongle, er... vault.

E-Stamp's fee is a 10% surcharge on top of the price of postage. So if you want \$165 in postage to send 500 first-class letters, E-Stamp charges an additional \$16.50. (You can save money by buying lots of postage at once, since there is a \$25 maximum surcharge per purchase.)

As you use the E-Stamp software to print envelopes, the cost of postage is subtracted from the amount remaining in your "electronic vault." You don't need to be online to print postage, only to buy it. The downside is that you've got to buy the dongle gadget, which comes in a \$50 starter kit. (However, the starter kit also includes \$25 of postage.) To use it, you'll need Windows 95, 98, or NT 4 and an inkjet or laser printer. There isn't a Mac version of E-Stamp.

The site plans to offer for sale sundry mailing accessories, such as postage scales, envelopes, labels, and other supplies.

-.-.- Stamps.com -.-.-

The only other e-postage company that has received the post office's stamp of approval (sorry) is Stamps.com. This service is similar to E-Stamp but has some significant differences. Most notably, Stamps.com doesn't use an "electronic vault" to store postage. You don't need to buy any special hardware -- all you need is to download their free software. The downside is that you must be online

to print postage.

Stamps.com users can send letters and packages via first class, priority mail and express mail. Certified mail and delivery confirmation (which you can check on the Web -- see below) are also available. To use the service, you'll need a computer that runs Windows 95, 98, or NT 4.0 (again, there's no Mac version) and a laser or inkjet printer.

The service has two pricing plans. First is a "business services plan" that, like E-Stamp, charges a 10% free above the regular cost of the postage. The other option is the "personal service plan." Aimed at those of us who need less than \$25 of postage each month, the service costs a flat rate of \$1.99 per month or \$19.99 for a year. If you're not sure, an online pricing calculator can help you decide which plan is a better deal for you.

-.-.- USPS -.-.-

The United States Postal Service doesn't sell e-stamps but you can buy traditional lick-and-stick and self-adhesive stamps from its StampsOnline site at www.stampsonline.com. This site offers all stamps that are currently in production, which is great if you really want some Year of the Hare or Malcolm X stamps but your local post office doesn't have them. StampsOnline sells stamps as their face value, with no surcharge except a \$1 shipping and handling fee.

The site also offers images, descriptions, and technical details about past years' stamps going back to 1996. This is a great resource for philatelists (stamp collectors.) You'll also find a full glossary of postage terms -- do you know what Plate Number Coils are? The "Just for Kids" area lets junior artists design their own stamps (just for pretend,) play a deliver-the-mail game, and other fun stuff.

Finally, the post office has another Web site at www.usps.com -- here you can learn about the latest stamp releases; find out the ZIP code of Anchorage, Alaska (or anywhere else); and even figure out those pesky ZIP+4 codes. Use the rate calculator to find out what it will cost to send a package. If you send a letter with the delivery confirmation option, the Track/Confirm page will tell you whether or not it had arrived.

=*=*= RELEVANT WEB SITES =*=

E-stamp: <http://www.e-stamp.com>
Stamps.com: <http://www.stamps.com>
StampsOnline: <http://www.stampsonline.com>
United States Post Office: <http://www.usps.com>

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Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

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